

House Education Committee Members,

State Board of Education Board member Marianne Yared McGuire said that any plan to mandate a state-wide high school curriculum, "should also require foreign language... it's contradictory to worry about global competition, [and] then ignore language requirements."

I agree. It's not just because my wife is a German teacher; it's also because we have a neighbor who works for Karmann and another for Daimler-Chrysler supplier. The former is a German, fluent in English, and the latter wishes he had taken German to better communicate with his co-workers.

Our high school is participating in a German-American exchange program. We just had 15 German students staying in our district, and we'll have 13 Michiganders going there, in June. The Germans had seven to nine years of English; our kids will have, at most, four years of German. And, out of a student population of 5700, about half take a language. There, it's 100%. While I would love to think that Michigan's students and parents would see another language's necessity and thus take classes in Spanish, German, or Chinese, surveys initiated by *Your Child* and the *Detroit News* and carried out by EPIC-MRA demonstrate that neither students nor parents see any post-secondary training or education as necessary. Both Republicans and Democrats have acknowledged this.

Thomas Friedman's most recent book, *The World Is Flat*, pointed out how competition shouldn't be seen as state versus state, country versus country, or region versus region; competition is now one global resident versus his competitors that were once separated by time zones or continents but now only by the speed of light. Michigan's students need those skills that allow them to succeed in the global marketplace.

These are just anecdotal accounts, but it's clear that American, and Michigan's students in particular, are lacking in skills their global competition possess. The *Washington Times*, "reported that, 'a 2002 survey by Healthy Companies International that found that American business executives speak on average 1.4 languages, while Dutch executives speak 3.9. Ambassador Jean David Levitte of France said, 'Language is the United States' last barrier....'" This may be why the United States Senate declared 2005 "The Year of Languages in the United States."

Both Michigan Republicans and Democrats have stressed the importance of a well-educated work force. Here's why the Presidents' Council (State Universities of Michigan) recommends that high school students study another language:

Language shapes the way people think and see the world.... [S]tudying a language other than English... open[s] up more jobs and promotions. [And, for those going to college, m]ore colleges are requiring proficiency in a foreign language as a requirement for earning a degree

The Michigan Scholars initiative also recommends at least two years of another language. Saginaw Public Schools' Michigan Scholar literature makes a compelling case for studying another language:

Students who study two years of a language other than English score an average of 60 points higher on the SAT I verbal test and 48 points higher on the math than students who do not complete two years of a language. For students who go on to study four years of a language in high school, the average gains are 149 and 150 points on the verbal and math tests, respectively.

Foreign language completion in high school also is linked to higher wages in the workplace. Studying a language other than English for two years raises a student's wages by an average of four percent. This wage advantage accrues even to those students who do not go on to postsecondary education. The U.S. Army pays a premium to enlisted soldiers who can speak common languages, and higher premiums to those who speak less common languages such as Arabic.

A survey of 400 faculty and staff members from 20 research universities concluded that learning a language other than English improves performance in English as well, because it introduces students to a theoretical view of language that aids the study of English. Studying a second language also gives students an opportunity to learn about and interact with other cultures.

To simply say that Michigan's students cannot master another language is cynically admitting that our children can't do as well as the Japanese, the Germans, the French, or the Dutch. In those countries, English is mandatory, no matter what career choice students make. Others dismiss a mandated high school foreign language requirement by saying the mandates need to start earlier in students' lives, when language acquisition is easiest. While I agree, we all know that the likelihood of the state mandating an elementary language class is very low; and, even if language-study should begin earlier, that doesn't negate the need for required study at the secondary level.

I know that there will be administrative problems with a language requirement. The day the Board's recommendations came out, skepticism in the press had already started: "Districts say they could have trouble getting enough...foreign language teachers.... "[S]ome school officials said districts will be stretched to find qualified teachers for the more rigorous course work, particularly in...foreign language," and more of the same. Superintendent Flanagan's presentation before the Board already anticipated these problems:

District[s... could] file a phase-in plan if [they were] unable to implement immediately... [since] some school districts, because of seriously constraining local needs and circumstances, may not be able immediately to implement all of the recommended graduation requirements. In such cases... such districts [would] be permitted to phase-in the graduation requirements..... [D]istricts needing to phase in the requirements [would] be required to file a phase-in plan with the Michigan Department of Education, which shall approve such plans on a case-by case basis.

Apparently this was enough to satisfy those who usually resist state mandates. Even the Michigan Association of School Boards endorses the requirements.

Please join Superintendent Flanagan, the State Board of Education, and groups like the Michigan Business Leaders For Education Excellence that endorsed their recommendations, and require a foreign language requirement for our future high school graduates. After all, if Michigan's students studied a language other than English, they wouldn't be surpassing other nations' children; they would be just catching up.

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House Education Committee Members,

Please include social studies in the new, statewide high school graduation requirements. I don't think I have to go into the need for citizens' broad social studies background beyond noting that it is one of the fundamental reasons Founding Fathers like Thomas Jefferson thought we ought to provide public education. In a participatory representative democracy, they thought, only with an informed citizenry could we hope to elect and support those who initiate, evaluate, and regulate public policy.

Obviously, in an authoritarian or totalitarian state, citizens' ignorance is actually an advantage; in a representative democracy, a republic, public civic competence is essential. Clearly, this is the reason the Michigan State Legislature already mandates a civics course, the only requirement, at the present time.

There is another reason social studies should be included in the new high school graduation requirements: The Michigan Merit Exam. When the Legislature initially considered replacing the MEAP with the new assessment, social studies was not "in the mix." Legislators apparently thought that social studies needed to be included both since it would help support the already accepted *Michigan Curriculum Framework* and because they felt civics, geography, history, and economics were integral elements of their children's education. I agree. Therefore, why would any legislator now think these social studies areas are not important?

I've read that there are fears that social studies teachers sometimes don't act professionally and thus impart their views onto students. First, as a social studies teacher of twenty years, I condemn those who do this. Second, there are administrative channels within a school that can and do deal with such concerns. If you know of specific examples of unprofessional social studies teachers who take advantage of their students' impressionability, I urge you to inform those teachers' schools' administration; please don't "throw out the baby with the bathwater" and reject any social studies education. Indeed, that would seem to not only be bad public policy, it would negate what a good social studies background would motivate you to do.

Both because it makes sense and since it reflects already legislated education policy, then, please vote to include social studies in the new, statewide high school graduation requirements.

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